



Brunswick Wildlife Mimids of the Lower Cape Fear

Three mimids (of the family *Mimidae*) call the Lower Cape Fear home. You may not recognize “mimid”; however, you may experience all three species in your neighborhood before the day is over. The Northern Mockingbird may provide your wake-up call, the Brown Thrasher may be seen scratching under your shrubs, and the Gray Catbird may be heard mewling while skulking in nearby thickets.

Our three residents are part of a relatively small family of thirty-five species in the Americas. They are in separate genera, look very different, and exhibit different behaviors. For example, mimids except the mockingbirds prefer dense thickets making them difficult to locate.

Why are they in the same family? Generally mimids are great mimics therefore the family name. These songbirds have amazing singing abilities with very elaborate songs and they usually develop a large repertoire. They incorporate songs or pieces of songs of other birds and other outdoor sounds into their lengthy songs.

In birds the larynx does not contain vocal cords and does not serve as the voice box. Its function is to regulate the flow of air into the trachea.

The sound producing organ in birds, the syrinx, is split into two chambers and songbirds like mimids have a more complex musculature which allows more intricate songs. Because both sides of the syrinx are able to operate independently, birds may sing with two voices simultaneously, like singing a duet with themselves.

The Gray Catbird, named for its mewling call, is a very accomplished and widely versatile singer. Its beautiful plumage is uniformly slate gray with a black cap and rufous undertail feathers.

The catbird's song is a long series of short, rapid syllables...including syllables of more than one hundred types of whistles, harsh tones, gurgles, whines, mews, squeaks, and occasionally bits of songs of other birds, sung in random order. In its improvised song, lasting up to ten minutes, the "notes" are not in a fixed sequence and are seldom repeated.

There is a wide variance among individuals in skill and propensity to mimic. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology they mimic at least forty-four species of birds, a gray tree frog, and a variety of mechanical sounds. When they use mimicry, they generally imitate songs and calls of other nearby birds.

The Brown Thrasher is the only thrasher east of the Rockies and Texas. It inhabits thickets and hedges near forest edges. Because of its tendency to forage on the ground and skulk in dense brush, the thrasher is more often heard than seen.

Like the catbird, the thrasher it is an accomplished singer. Its primary song is loud, long, and variable and may include mimicry. Mimicry demonstrates their ability to learn songs and over time males develop a large song repertory of over one thousand song syllables, one of the largest repertoires of North American songbirds. Females, however, are not known to sing.

The mockingbird is the most well know of the three, even by non-birders, especially those that want to keep their windows open on beautiful spring nights and cannot sleep through the mockingbird's ceaseless singing. The Mockingbird obviously enjoys hearing itself sing and want you to also. Its definitely rules the yard on moonlit nights.

Unlike our other two, the mockingbird is not a skulker and may be seen in the open and near houses. A common backyard bird, it has adjusted well to living with humans.

Mockingbirds are fearless defenders of their nests and seem to enjoy making life miserable for cats (and sometimes people) that enter their territory by flying down and striking the back of an invader with their bills. This is no shy bird!

Mockingbirds are the most accomplished of our three mimics, even including non-avian sounds in their song such as the sounds of beepers, cell phones, and car alarms. Both male and female mockingbirds sing and their repertoire may contain over 150 song types.

If you hear but do not see a mimid songster, it is possible to make an educated guess about its identity. The catbird song is similar to the thrasher and mockingbird; however, those species typically repeat syllables where the catbird does not.

The thrasher's song can be differentiated from mockingbird and catbird songs because the thrasher generally repeats song units twice. If phrases are repeated from two to six times and include songs of several other birds, you are listening to "the Boss".

John Ennis

Captions:

Gray Catbird: “The catbird is uniformly slate gray with rufous undertail feathers”

Brown Thrasher: “A skulker that tends to forage on the ground in dense brush, the Brown Thrasher is often heard without being seen”



The mockingbird project:

<http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/cab82/Mockingbirds.html>